



# UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green

## These Precedented Times

by *Meg Costello*

We hear it a lot lately, but are we really living in “unprecedented times?” For three centuries, Falmouth residents have contended with deadly plagues that brought sickness, fear, and controversy. Looking back at these disasters from a historical perspective, we see much that is dark, but also brighter themes of opportunity and optimism.



Photo by Bob Haskell, 2020

Our own Dr. Francis Wicks took a risk when he opened a smallpox inoculation hospital in Falmouth in 1797. So did the town meeting members who assented to his plan. Still controversial, inoculation required making the patient ill with a dose of live smallpox virus. By choosing the timing and type of exposure, doctors could usually trigger a milder case than if the patient caught the pox randomly. Once the patients recovered, they enjoyed lifetime immunity to the disease.

In 1721, Boston’s Dr. Zabdiel Boylston was the first American to inoculate against smallpox. Many people resisted the concept, sometimes violently. Boylston’s pitch sounded crazy to them. “I’m going to give you the pox now, to make sure you won’t get the pox later. This works! Well, most of the time it works. Trust me, I’m a doctor.” Can you blame them for being suspicious? Furious debates raged in the Boston newspapers. Oddly enough, Ben Franklin, champion of the Enlightenment, argued against inoculation, while the Rev. Cotton Mather preached in favor of it. For his pains, Mather got a brick thrown through his window.



Boylston’s inoculation program demonstrably saved lives, but, wanting to control the practice, Massachusetts lawmakers passed laws requiring inoculation to be administered only by doctors in licensed hospitals. Town governments decreed who got the licenses, and where the hospitals could be built. Falmouth’s town meeting denied such a license in 1778, though the records are unclear about who was seeking it on that occasion.

Dr. Francis Wicks house on Palmer Avenue. Wicks gave vaccinations here, “at my dwelling place,” in 1800. Photo in Museums archives.



Cartoon illustrating fears about vaccination. Downloaded from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_cow\\_pock.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_cow_pock.jpg)

Nineteen years later, attitudes had shifted, and on August 10, 1797, town meeting granted Dr. Francis Wicks “liberty to set up inoculation for six years during the winter . . . in [some?] suitable place . . . to be under the restrictions of [a] committee.”<sup>21</sup> The motion passed with 44 yeas, 21 nays.<sup>22</sup>

The suitable place for the hospital turned out to be Nobska Point, which was nearly as remote as you could get at the time. (It wouldn’t have a lighthouse for another thirty years.)

In 1799, while the Falmouth hospital was operating, bombshell news hit the Boston papers. English physician Edward Jenner had discovered a safer way to prevent smallpox, by injecting patients with a mild disease called cowpox. Since the Latin word for cow was “vacca,” this practice was soon being called “vaccination.” Using Jenner’s method, the patient never fell ill, was never contagious, and didn’t need to be hospitalized.

Dr. Wicks immediately offered this new treatment to his patients. In late November 1800, New Bedford’s *Columbian Courier*<sup>23</sup> carried an announcement:

*Frank Wicks*

Continues to inoculate with  
the SMALL POX,  
at his Hospital in Falmouth, for Twelve  
Dollars. --- He likewise inoculates at his  
Dwelling-House in said town, with the  
COW, or KINE POX,  
for Four Dollars. Nov. 21, 1800



We're not sure how many people took advantage of this offer. People had barely gotten used to the idea of inoculation, and now the doctors wanted to inject them with a cow disease! Some wondered, "What if the vaccination made you grow horns, an udder, or perhaps hooves and a tail?"

Decades passed, and vaccination gained more public trust, though it was still not mandatory. When smallpox outbreaks occurred, those infected, or exposed, were quarantined to stop the spread.

This happened to Katharine Lee Bates in 1887. On a Christmas visit with friends in Connecticut, she was exposed to smallpox. While quarantined, she began writing a young adult novel for a contest sponsored by the Congregational Sunday-School and Publishing Society. She wrote to a friend, "The title is *Rose and Thorn* . . . and the plot is wildly improbable, with small-pox in it . . . I'm going to write a chapter a day."

In January 1889, her story won first prize and \$700 in cash. Katharine used the money to spend a year doing research at Oxford University for her master's degree. This credential, in turn, allowed her to become a full professor at Wellesley College. Biographer Melinda Ponder says Katharine's exposure to smallpox was "an event that would change her life,"<sup>iv</sup> thanks to her constructive response to it.

The entire town of Falmouth experienced quarantine in 1918 when the Spanish flu spread around the world, causing many deaths. Much of the town was closed, including theaters, churches, and schools. As today, an early return to normal led to a second surge of infections and a renewed quarantine. But in time things returned to normal. [READ MORE](#)

The fruits of today's quarantine won't be apparent for years to come. Many will be negative, but some will be positive, as was the case with Katharine.

Flash forward to 2020. Smallpox, thankfully, has been eradicated, but now we are grappling with COVID-19. Keeping the needs of future researchers in mind, Museums on the Green created a [COVID-19 archive](#). Everyone is invited to submit their own pictures, recordings, and reflections.

Eliot Sklar responded to our call. No stranger to adversity, Mr. Sklar is a 94-year-old World War II veteran. He served as a seaman aboard the U.S. Navy destroyer *Hambleton*, and participated in four invasions: Normandy, Cherbourg, Southern France, and Okinawa. For his role in the liberation of France, he was named a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor in 2013.<sup>v</sup> [MORE INFO](#)

Now a resident at Atria, Mr. Sklar responded to being locked down in a way that would have made Katharine Lee Bates proud. He wrote a series of poems, applying humor and wisdom to the present crisis. Two of his poems are printed on the following page.

Scientists fight disease, in part, with their microscopes. Historians fight the fear and confusion surrounding disease by using a "macroscope"—the long, broad view that history affords. Some things become clearer when you pull back and take the macroscopic view. We really aren't in this alone. This has all happened before.



Photos by Bob Haskell, 2020



Eliot Sklar, c1945. Photo from capenews.net, Veterans Spotlight, Feb. 15, 2019  
Eliot Sklar, 2020. Photo courtesy of Jerry Sklar

### **Encouragement:**

Residents of this nursing home, I write this poem to you.  
I know you're feeling miserable, but there are lots of things  
that you can do.  
Visit some past memories that meant a lot to you.  
Each morning when you awake, don't brush your hair, no  
make up on,  
Look in the mirror, you will laugh, I promise you.  
I am quite old, I live alone, in an assisted living home.  
I have one room that I'm confined to since the COVID-19  
virus appeared.  
I survived the war, WW II, got lots of medals that I still  
have today.  
So when you get well, COVID-19 is gone,  
I'll show all my medals to you.  
So that's the time, if you would like a date,  
Call me, to spend some time with you.  
But if you're married, forget what I said,  
No trouble do I need from you.

P.S. 94 years young  
Full head of hair  
All my teeth  
Hope we can meet, soon

### **Faith:**

Am I a man of faith? To some degree,  
I am. How trustworthy is this word, or  
How deceptive it can be.  
The reason that I wonder, is because of history.  
The tragedy of the Holocaust is still a mystery to me.  
Then I remember Pearl Harbor, and all  
The men and women who died.  
And then I think of the four invasions  
That I participated in, and God was so good to me.  
And there was a famous rabbi, who wrote these  
famous words:  
'Why do bad things happen to good people?'  
I will never forget those words.  
So this is still my struggle, yes I do  
Believe there is a God.  
So I think that I should ask him  
To do a better job.

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<sup>i</sup> Falmouth Town Records Vol. 2, p. 344.

<sup>ii</sup> Falmouth Town Records, Vol. 2, p. 396.

<sup>iii</sup> New Bedford *Columbian Courier*, 11/21/1800, Vol. II, Issue 51, p. 3

<sup>iv</sup> Melinda M. Ponder, *Katharine Lee Bates: From Sea to Shining Sea* (Chicago, Windy City Publishers, 2017) p.70.

<sup>v</sup> See Wayne Soares's profile of Eliot Sklar at [https://www.capenews.net/falmouth/columns/veterans-spotlight-eliot-sklar/article\\_ccc32dd6-c9a8-5484-97f6-4eb470f3a440.html](https://www.capenews.net/falmouth/columns/veterans-spotlight-eliot-sklar/article_ccc32dd6-c9a8-5484-97f6-4eb470f3a440.html)